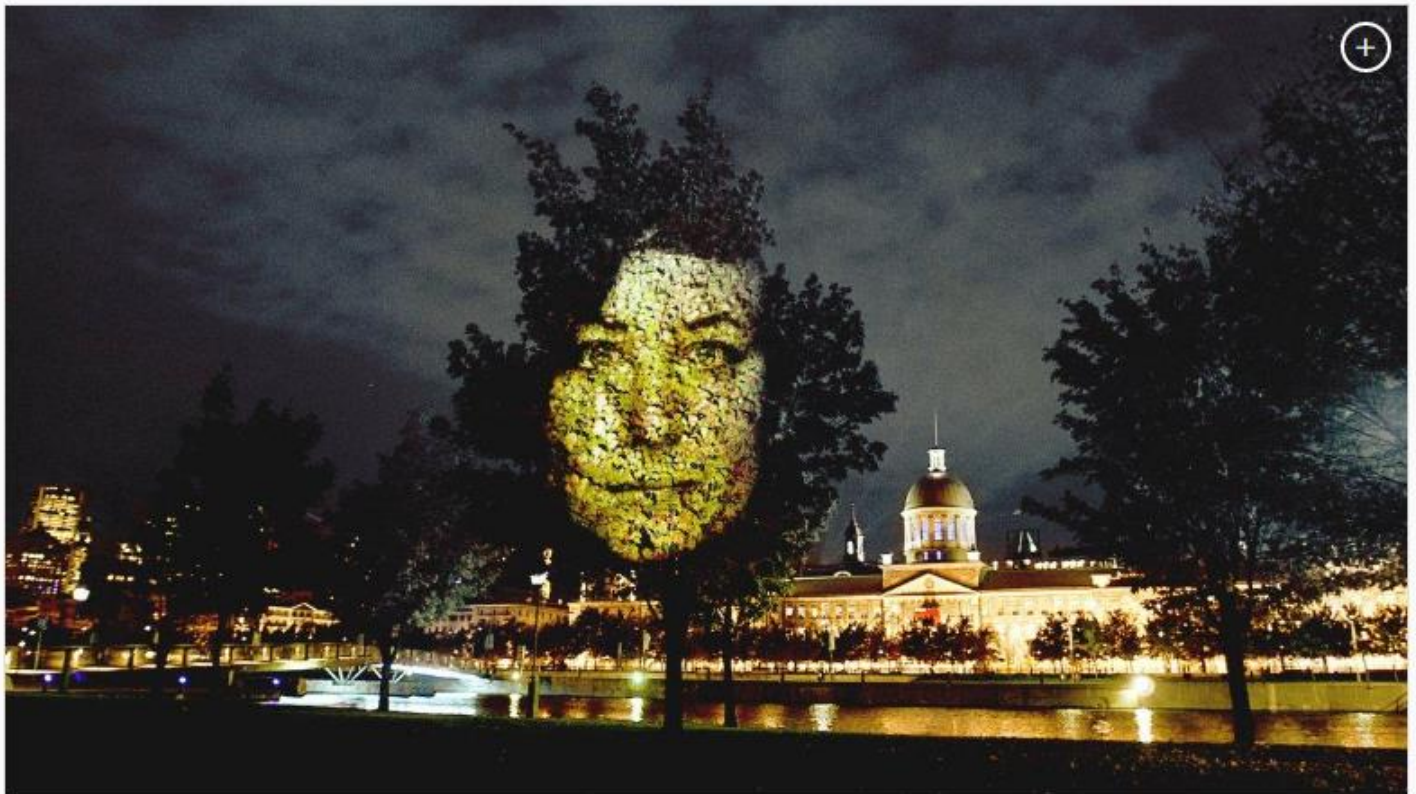


# Montreal, Canada marks 375th anniversary with dazzling light shows



In the Old Montreal area, the “Cite Memoire” installation throws ghostly scenes and characters from the region’s past onto its stone facades, alleyways and more. (TOURISME MONTREAL)

BY

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Paris is called “the city of light,” but this year, Montreal seems hellbent on seizing that title for itself.

Everywhere you walk in the central sections of this Canadian city — which is the most populous municipality in the province of Quebec — light shows project flickering images or beam flashy videos across buildings and billboards.

All these illuminations — some stately, some eerie, but most merely fun — were created to celebrate the 375th anniversary of Montreal’s founding as a settlement by the French.



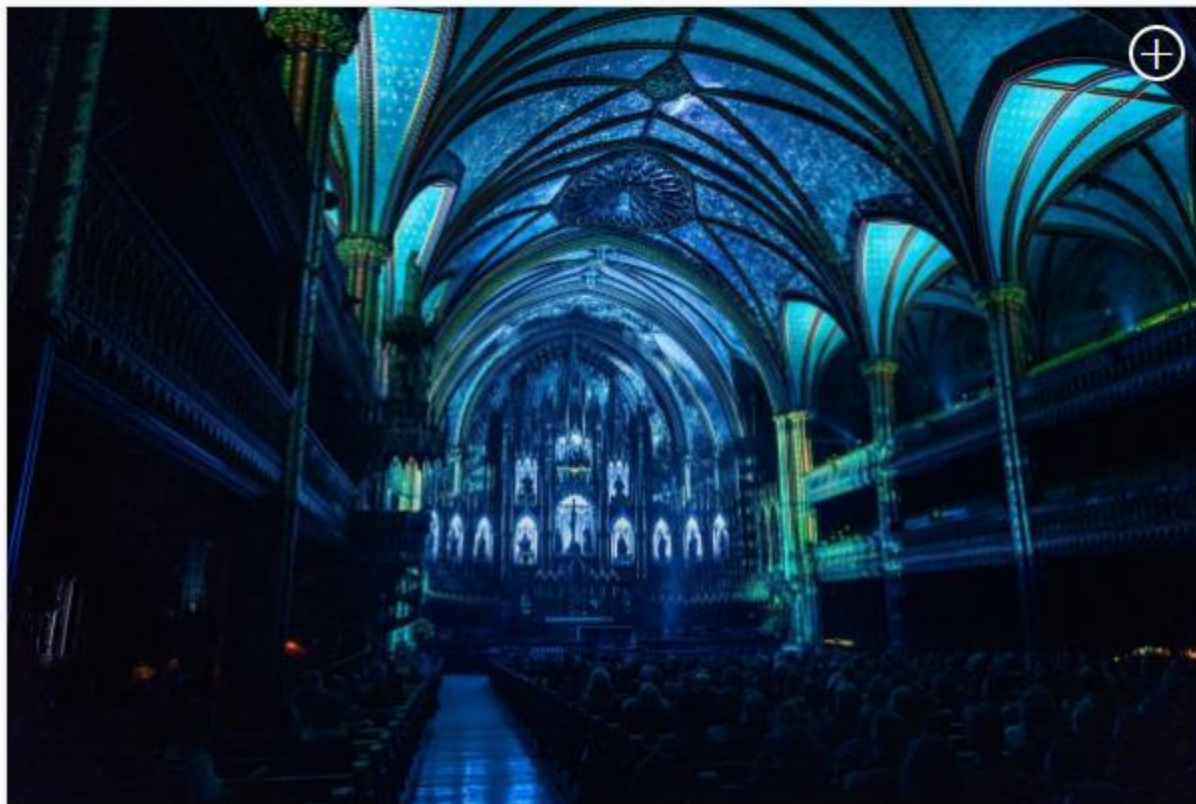
The neighborhood of Old Montreal. (TOURISME MONTREAL)

In the Old Montreal area, the “Cite Memoire” instillation throws ghostly scenes and characters from the region’s rough and tumble past onto its stone facades, or casts them down its spooky alleyways. Up in the slicker shopping meccas of Saint Catherine Street in Downtown Montreal, bursts of color kaleidoscope over the 19th century Christ Church Cathedral, while on busy Saint Laurent Street, a whimsical swing set of colored orbs rocks back and forth, as goofy synthesizer music provides an impish soundtrack.

It might sound weird to toast to 375 years, but you can’t blame the locals for not wanting to wait another quarter-century to reach their 400th anniversary. Instead, they went all in for 2017, marking it with festivals, concerts, foodie events, museum exhibitions and yes, scads of outdoor light shows.

What’s the connection between Montreal and all this lumiere? Maybe it has to do with the city’s bitter cold winters, and hard architecture, two features that could use all the warm colors and animation they can get. You’ll find more of

them at a show called “Aura,” which tarts up in the inside of the most revered religious institution in town, the Notre-Dame Basilica.



The light show, “Aura,” illuminates the inside of the Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal. (MARTIN GIRARD /TOURISME MONTREAL)

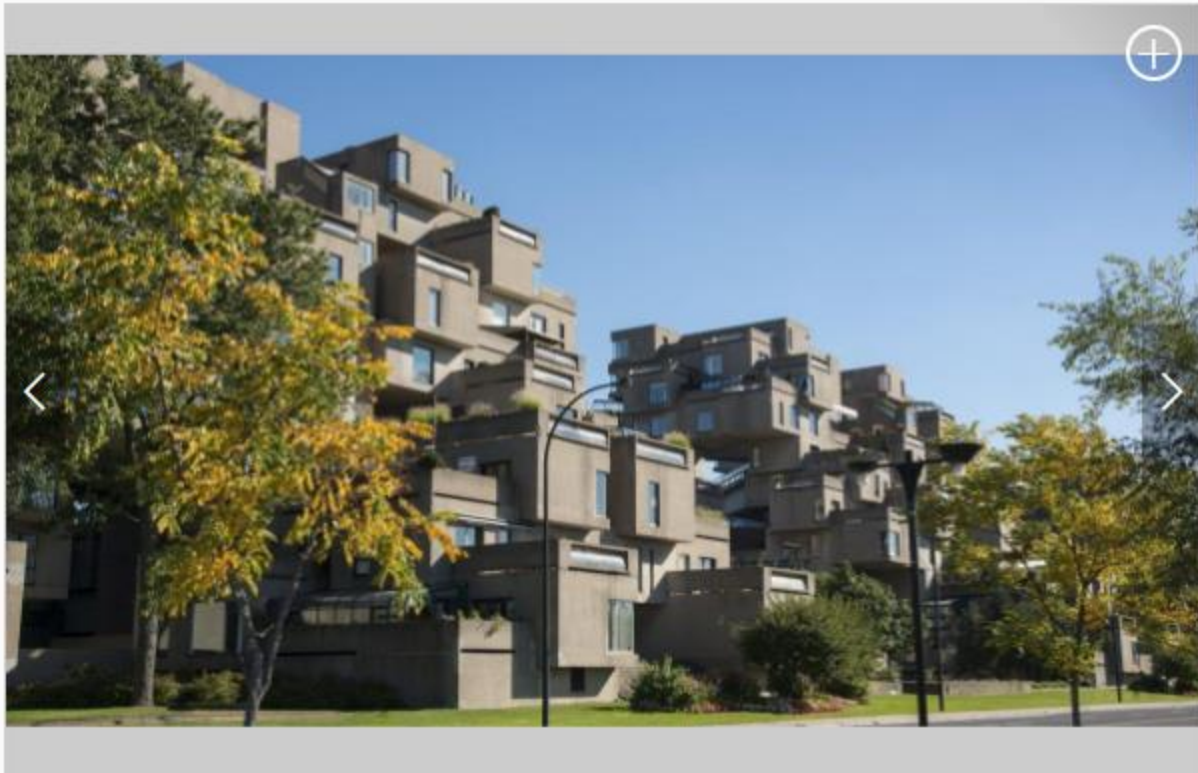
Then, starting in May, illuminations will anoint the city’s iconic Jacques-Cartier Bridge with patterns and images depicting the seasons, the traffic patterns, as well as events from around the city. Those last two projects come courtesy of the Montreal-based Moment Factory, a multimedia entertainment studio best known for its innovative designs for concert tours for acts like Madonna, Jay-Z, Nine Inch Nails and many more.



Starting in May, illuminations will anoint Montreal's iconic Jacques-Cartier Bridge to celebrate the city's 375th anniversary. (TOURISME MONTREAL)

As the city marks its own anniversary this year, I also have a personal Montreal date to celebrate. My dad grew up here and my family made periodic pilgrimages during my youth. Fifty summers ago, my family brought me to see Expo 67, a world's fair held to herald the city's coming out as a modern destination. It's here that a piece of architecture first entranced me — Habitat 67, a brutalist vision for urban living that looks like something a gifted kid would make from toy building blocks. It's made up of 354 prefabricated concrete forms stacked together unevenly.

The architect who created it, Moshe Safdie, was just 23 at the time. To mark its golden anniversary, I raced to see its concrete structure up close, then strolled through its walkways. Today, Habitat has the look of a cool ruin, with a mid-century modern simplicity.



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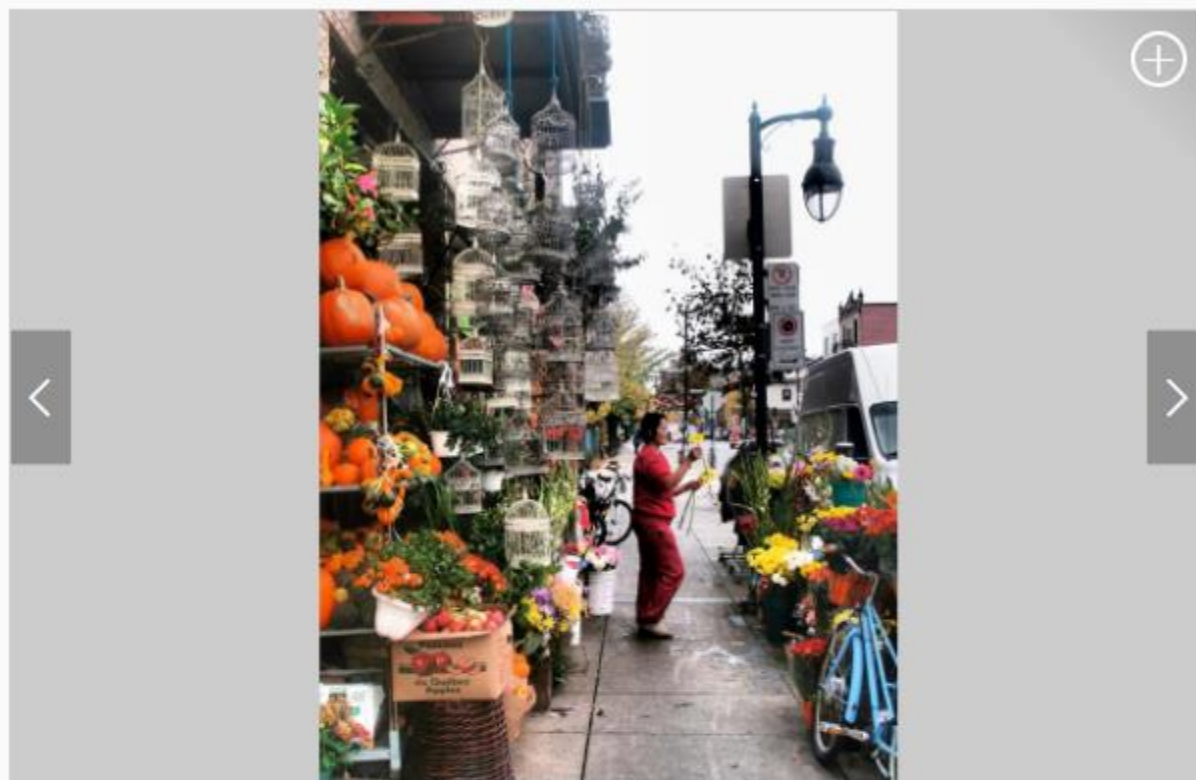
Habitat 67 was created by architect Moshe Safdie 50 years ago.

(JEAN-NICOLAS NAULT/TOURISME MONTREAL)

Next, I ventured to The Plateau, an area that corrals a cluster of hip and artsy neighborhoods, including Mile End, where you can sample the famous Montreal bagels. Families have divided, and hearts have broken, over who makes the better bagel, Montreal or New York. But they're so different, why choose? The orb in Montreal is smaller but much more dense, with less distracting dough. It's sweeter too, because the bagels are washed in honey water before baking. They're certainly cheaper than New York's brand — 65 cents to our \$1.25, on average.

But, then, everything here will strike Americans as a bargain. The Canadian dollar is around 75 cents to the American one right now. That helps explain why another sacred food item here — the smoked meat sandwich — costs about half as much as its New York equivalent, the corned beef sandwich. Montreal's take has a different texture and flavor than the New York staple, with a thicker

cut, and more smokiness. You can find the ideal interpretation at Schwartz's (schwartzsdeli.com) in Mile End.



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Mile End is an artistic neighborhood in Montreal.

(TOURISME MONTREAL)

To work off all that beef, take a brisk walk around the quirky book stores and vinyl shops in the nabe, as well as through the “Mural Zone,” which colors the area with some of the world’s best sanctioned street art. Nearby, in front of Parc du Portugal (Little Portugal), you can locate the longtime stone home of the late Leonard Cohen, the city’s poetic pride.

Starting Nov. 9th, Montreal will salute the singer with a huge art and sound exhibit at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal. In the Plateau, you can trace many of the places Cohen frequented in his years here. In the old part of the city you’ll find another key Cohen allusion — the Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel, which boasts the “lady of the harbor” sculpture the singer alluded to in his classic ode to “Suzanne.”



The Plateau is an area of Montreal that corrals a cluster of hip and artsy neighborhoods. (TOURISME MONTREAL)

Nearby, you'll find scores of contemporary art galleries, a nice contrast to the official Museum District, which contains the city's august Montreal Museum of Fine Arts ([mbam.qc.ca/en](http://mbam.qc.ca/en)). Its permanent collection features works by some of my favorite mid-century Canadian artists, including Ron Martin, whose paintings burst with artery-like ventricles of color, and Claude Tousignant, known for his bright spirals. For a hint of camp art, check out the nearby Les Cours Mont-Royal mall, where, on the second floor sits a permanent Barbie Expo. This hilarious instillation boasts hundreds of the iconic dolls, from a "Mod Barbie" to a "Joan Jett Barbie" to, my fave — a piece of plastic depicting actress Tippi Hedren in "The Birds" being pecked by scores of mad beaks.

The high-low contrast in the art scene has a parallel in food. While Montreal may be known for that crude mess of french fries, cheese curds and gravy known as poutine, many places in town boast refined restaurants. The restaurant Manitoba ([restaurantmanitoba.com](http://restaurantmanitoba.com)) treats its fish with a delicate brilliance, while Lili.Co ([restolilico.com](http://restolilico.com)) makes offal — yes, animal organs —

taste like anything but.



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(TOURISME MONTREAL)

Outposts like these add to the international flair of Montreal, a feeling enhanced by the French you'll hear spoken everywhere you go. The lilts of language underscore Montreal's connection to France, just one part of a history now being illuminated like never before.

### If you go...

**Fly:** One-way flights to Montreal out of NYC-area airports can be found for under \$100.

**Stay:** Hotel Gault is a chic boutique hotel in Old Montreal with down-to-earth rates that start at \$128 a night. [hotelgault.com](http://hotelgault.com)





(TOURISME MONTREAL)



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The Barbie Expo, a permanent installation at the Les Cours Mont-Royal mall in Montreal, boasts hundreds of the iconic dolls.

**More info:** For all events on Montreal's 375th anniversary itinerary, visit [375mtl.com/en](http://375mtl.com/en).